



Stage one



70 6 7

Chapter 1 by Samwise

The storm outside was fierce, not that we'd been expecting an easy life here. I mean- unsettled planets weren't exactly known as the most hospitable locations, and this chunk of ore was still in the first stage of colonization- Atmosphere production. Which means two main things, minimum staff, and minimal services. We could barely shit and flush without having permission from the higher ups.

The lights above my head flickered into action as I walked down the long metal corridor toward my office, each light was fitted with a sensor to detect movement- as an effort to conserve energy they turned themselves on and off as the staff moved beneath them. In fairness the idea worked well, energy consumption sank dramatically as a result, but the new procedure created an incredible feeling of unease as you each stretch of corridor was lit independantly, depending on where you wanted to go you could spend upto seven or eight minutes walking into the receding darkness, but also being followed by it as the lights shut themselves down behind you.

Another blast of wind knocked the structure, you could hear it ripping at the foundations as if it had claws and teeth. Hammering pebbles and stones into the slightly-too-low ceilings and walls like bullets from guns. After a time though, it became nothing but background noise, just like you got used to the unusual lighting, the sounds just became part of the life here. The door to my office finally appeared in the gloom, I pressed my thumb against the handle and waited for the mechanism to stir, after a moment it whirred and the thick metal hissed out of it's position and allowed me to enter.

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For a few moments I hesitated, they really weren't going to be pleased when I told them they couldn't complete the supply run for another few hours. These storms had already kept them in orbit for three days longer than planned, with an internal sigh I connected the call.

Chapter 2 by StanG



"Oh, come on, Alex! We need to re-supply as soon as possible or we'll be breathing carbon dioxide up here!"

"Chill, Sam. It's not like I can do anything about the weather on this rock, is it!?" I moaned. "We'll have you down as soon as it's safe and not an hour before. Anyway, it looks like the long-range is picking up a clearing in the clouds a couple hours from now. So just try to hang in there, buddy. We'll do our best to let you know the second you can come down, okay?"

"Yeah, sorry, Alex. I realise there's nothing you can do about atmospherics in a Stage One, but we'd all be very grateful for landing soonest. Sam out."

As the comms quieted down, I morosely wondered if we'd lose yet another seed supply ship, all due to these damned weather fronts that had been plaguing this battered rock for weeks now! Every time a new supply ship entered our system, the weather seemed to do all it could to keep them away. If I didn't know any better, I would think that this heap of crap was aware of us and our attempts at re-colonisation. But that's just crazy thinking!

Chapter 3 by StanG



"ETA on arrival at the Stage One in approximately 30 minutes," Alina Gagarin called over the intercom. "I wonder if anything's improved, since the last ship arrived? What d'ya think, Captain?"

"I think we should all just concentrate on making sure this orbital entry goes smoothly, Gagarin. Do you hear me?"

"Ave Sir. Sorry Captain. I really am trying my best not to get sidetracked. But remembering the

playback they showed us in training of the previous attempt by our top Atmo-production Craft and its disastrous freefall re-entry... Well, that speed is kinda hard to kick you know?"

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"Okay, Alina. But remember, we are not going to attempt anything until I'm certain there will be no danger to this ship or its crew. And any action we take would need confirmation from the 2IC and myself before we go ahead.

"Now. Give me full scans, pole to pole in all spectrums and inform me of any anomalies. I'll be in my ready room. XO, you have the bridge."

"Aye Sir, I have the bridge." Executive Officer Don Barnes replied. "I will inform you immediately if there's any change in atmospherics."

It had been a long trip to this single, desolate planet in this distant, bleak galaxy and Captain Andrien Leveque had been dreaming of a terrible end to this journey. Night after night, the same vision plagued his off duty hours, of a strange, cloud-like hand reaching up from a dark, tumultuous planet to grasp at the vessel he commanded, raking the hull with nails as sharp as metallic talons, causing crew and vessel to plunge, screaming into the blackened, smoky abyss. Whereupon he would wake in a terror, hot and sticky, and would have to take a cool shower, a luxury only the starship's captain could afford, before leaving his quarters.

The sleepless nights were taking a heavy toll on the captain's sensibilities. Often, he would hear a spectral voice whispering menacingly beside him as he walked the ship's corridors on his inspection rounds. Sometimes, it would be so near and unexpected as to make him jump perceptibly as if he was being poked by an invisible hand. The crew were beginning to notice.

An alarm abruptly blared throughout the ship.

The intercom cracked to life and Captain Leveque heard the XO's tinny voice splutter "All hands, action stations. We're under attack from an unknown source!"

"What is the threat and from which quarter, XO?" the captain asked as he left his ready room.

"Don't know, Sir. The scanners are either not working or there's nothing out there to see. I don't understand it. Captain"

An earsplitting ripping noise assailed the captain as he received any responses or

commands the captain answered, "I'll be right back."

This is it.

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His vision appeared to be coming true. The ship was being torn apart by an amorphous, dark cloud. It seemed as though the planet had reared up to take the ship apart like a Christmas cracker.

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